

# Assessing Golf Courses as Cultural Resources

**G**olf courses are gradually emerging as an important cultural resource in the United States, able to reveal much about social history and the development of community planning and recreational landscape design. After its beginnings in this country in the late 19th century, golf grew tremendously in popularity during the 1910s and 1920s. What has been called the “Golden Age of Golf” occurred during this era, when most of our greatest courses were designed and constructed. Golf’s popularity, and the redesign of existing courses and the construction of new ones, has continued nearly unabated since. American golf courses and their associated structures and buildings are nearly all 20th century in origin and as cultural resources, they have rarely been threatened, other than by the updating of facilities. Typically, there has been little pressure to identify and evaluate golf courses. This situation is changing. Golf courses were usually constructed on the outskirts of communities or at resort developments. As suburban America alters with the expansion of sprawl and as interest increases in the history of suburbia, land planning, and landscape architecture and design, the need to

understand the importance of the golf course as a cultural resource has increased.

The popular location for golf courses in the tamed, pastoral land between the city and rural America speaks of the continuing attraction that this environment holds, which in large part accounts for the appeal of the suburbs. Ideally incorporating convenient access to the city with the most attractive attributes of life in the country, this was an advantageous location for golf courses where generally large open land parcels offered terrain that could be manipulated into a successful course. Golf courses were often built as part of a planned residential community, or as a feature at a country club, with the very name of this social and recreational institution evoking the favorable associations given the suburban environment. Frequently, golf courses and their associated buildings from the early and mid-20th century reveal much about the stratification of American society by economic class, ethnic and racial identification, and gender. Changes in golf course buildings and their uses often reflect the changes that have occurred in American society, as doors have been opened to those previously barred from full participation in various aspects of American life. Golf courses and their associated buildings can function as a record of important social development. As landscapes, golf courses evolve over time through natural change, use, and redesign, and thereby present challenges in cultural resource evaluation.

## ***History of Golf in the United States***

The origins of golf in the United States are not clearly known, just as they are shrouded in myth and mystery in Europe. What is apparent is that the game came from Scotland to the United States, moving fairly quickly in the late 19th century from an amateur’s informal pastime played on rough open land to an organized game conducted on a constructed course. Golf is believed to have originated in Holland, where in its early form it was actively played by the early 16th century. However, it has long been a pastime in Scotland, where it is variously credited with dat-

*Hermitage Golf, Henrico County, Virginia. View from the first hole looking toward the club house (west) in c. 1948. Photo courtesy Dementi Studio, Richmond, Virginia.*



ing to the late 1400s, the mid-14th century, and even to the 12th century. In the United States, there are documented references to the game in the 18th century. It was not until the late 1880s that lasting interest in the game was established by John Reid, a Scottish immigrant living in Yonkers, New York. Reid had prospered sufficiently in his industrial ventures that he had enough free time and extra money for leisure activities. Tiring of other recreational pursuits, Reid determined to try golf and in 1887, he obtained golf equipment from the legendary links at St. Andrews in Scotland. In 1888, Reid and a circle of adventurous friends formed the St. Andrews Golf Club, considered the first permanent club in the United States and began playing the game using three holes laid out in Reid's cow pasture.

From these modest beginnings, golf's popularity quickly spread and golfing clubs were formed and courses were set up in other U.S. cities. Golf's popularity grew largely as a game played by wealthy men at private clubs with public facilities such as the course at New York's Van Courtland Park a rare exception.

The prosperous 1920s saw a rapid rise in interest in golf. By 1930, there were 2.25 million Americans engaging in the game; from 742 golf courses in 1916, the number of facilities grew to 5,691 by 1930. During the next two decades, as the Great Depression crippled the American economy and World War II took young men off to war, pursuit of the game of golf became a luxury to most of those who might otherwise have played and fewer courses were constructed. By the late 1940s, golf competitions were reviving and interest in the sport was again gaining ground. As new courses were built and existing courses modified, course lengths were often increased, offering more yardage at each hole to accommodate the greater distance that improved clubs and stronger players could drive the ball. While American golf courses of the 20th century's early decades were almost invariably modeled on the well-known links in Scotland, an American style gradually appeared as simultaneous advances in course maintenance equipment and turf management led to a more cultivated type of golf course.

#### ***Golf Course Architects***

Two of the best known and most talented golf course architects working in the United States in the early 20th century were Donald J.

Ross (1872-1948) and Albert Warren Tillinghast (1874-1942). Donald Ross emigrated from Scotland in 1899, after gaining a wealth of knowledge about the game of golf and Scottish golf course design. He had set himself the task of learning all that he could about the game with the intention of applying his knowledge in America as golf grew in fashion in his newly adopted country. His training included a stint at St. Andrews studying with "Old Tom" Morris (1821-1908), the revered golf pro who managed the St. Andrews green and was the first recognized golf course architect.

A.W. Tillinghast was born to a monied family in Philadelphia and, after years of experience playing the game of golf, fell into course design in response to a friend's invitation to lay out a country club course in 1909. This started Tillinghast on a life-long career during which he designed or reworked courses throughout the country. While not as prolific as Ross, who estimated that he worked in 45 of the 48 states during his career, Tillinghast more frequently visited sites where his golf course designs were being installed and often oversaw their construction. Tillinghast is known for the variety of his courses with no two alike. Ross designed well over 400 courses and because of the era's impediments to speedy travel, he was not able to visit them all or to make more than one or two inspections of those he did see. To serve his many clients, he maintained a winter office in Pinehurst, North Carolina, a summer office in New England, and three branch offices, while often relying on his employees to oversee construction from his detailed drawings. Ross is known for upholding the Scottish tradition of course design by relying on naturalness in construction and building simple, but strategically calculated holes that would punish the overly bold player. Emphasis on natural features is also found in Tillinghast's work, as both Ross and Tillinghast looked for favorable natural conditions when siting golf courses and sought to alter the natural terrain, vegetation, and soil conditions as little as possible. Sandy soil with dunes, hillocks, and rolling ground were considered ideal and were epitomized by conditions found on parts of Long Island, New York; near Cape Cod, Massachusetts; and in the sand barrens of Pinehurst, North Carolina.

#### ***Golf Course, Structures, and Buildings***

While golf courses vary widely in their layouts and topographic characteristics, there are

certain constant components. The primary resource is the landscape. A regulation course, at least by the 1940s, was understood as having 18 holes with a total length of between 5,000 to 7,000 yards (the total measurement from the tee to the putting green hole of all 18 holes). Each hole consists of three distinctive primary sections: the teeing ground, the fairway (containing the putting green), and the rough. On the teeing ground, the grass is maintained at a lower cut and the surface is even. This is the area where the player hits the golf ball into play. The fairway is the long section between the teeing ground and the putting green, where the grass is usually at moderate length. At the putting green, the 4.25 inch diameter hole is cut as the eventual target for the player. Putting green grass is low and very fine in order to offer better ball rolling characteristics. Around the tee, fairway, and putting green are areas referred to as the rough. The rough usually includes less carefully maintained grass, shrubs, and trees.

The design signature of the master golf architect is how he or she lays out the circulation pattern and manipulates the land mass to challenge the player's effort to place the ball in the 18 holes. Each hole will have characteristics that make it more or less challenging. Hazards, or obstacles that challenge the player, take several forms. Bunkers and water features are the most common hazards. The bunker is a recess or hole, typically containing sand, and water hazards may be a brook, a stream, a natural marsh, a natural seaside, or a lake inlet. The master designer will take advantage of, or improve upon, land forms to create further challenges. Dramatic or subtle shifts in the levels and planes of the land are common; swales and mounding can add to the difficulty of a course. The visual line of play can also offer challenges. Strategically-sited trees and other natural plantings form visual barriers and sometimes holes are laid out in dogleg form with a right or left jog in the fairway before it gives way to the putting green. Other minor features that may be found on golf courses include practice putting greens, most often located near the club house and driving ranges.

Some of the earliest course designs in the United States had peculiar geometric characteristics that recalled the lines of classical French geometric landscapes of the 18th century. The bunkers on these earlier courses were neat rectangular forms, much like small swimming pools;

land forms called chocolate drop mounds, with an appearance befitting their descriptive name, were often used. This type of course fell from favor as the influence of naturalistic Scottish designs reached America in the early 20th century taking inspiration from famous courses in Scotland such as St. Andrews and North Berwick. The practice of making stylistic references to precedence in golf course design is not unlike the use of stylistic references in building design and landscape architecture.

A major component of most golf courses is the club house. While some of the most celebrated courses in the United States have large architect-designed club houses or building complexes, many have more modest buildings and some of the early clubs never expanded into multi-service complexes with other facilities such as swimming pools and tennis courts. Nonetheless, there are very impressive architect-designed buildings on some historic courses. Clifford Charles Wendehack published *Golf & Country Clubs* in 1929 in which notable architects who designed golf course club houses are listed throughout the work, including Holabird and Roche, Albert Kahn, Mellor, Meigs and Howe, Addison Miner, and George B. Post and Sons. Occasionally, the club house may have been a pre-existing residence. Because golf courses were often built in rural areas, surviving farm buildings sometimes became golf course service buildings; barns and equipment sheds were often retained to house maintenance equipment or golf carts.

Some club houses reflect the important social evolution of the game of golf. Caddies were more popular before the advent of golf carts in the 1950s and in many clubs there was a separate area or even a separate building for caddies. As women pursued more active athletic lifestyles as the 20th century progressed, locker rooms and separate facilities were incorporated into previously male dominated institutions. There are historic courses that have lost their original club house or the building may survive in heavily remodeled condition. Secondary features that are often included on golf courses are storm shelters, water fountains, ball cleaning stands, benches, maintenance buildings (usually on remote parts of the course), walls, bridges, and fences. There may also be a separate residence for the assigned professional golfer or the course manager. In elaborate, often architect-designed complexes,



Sewell's Point  
Golf Course Club  
House. Photo by  
Susan E. Smead.

there are usually other sports facilities, such as pool houses, stables, tennis courts, residential facilities, or a grounds keeper's complex. In the 1950s, one of the significant evolutions of the game occurred when golf carts were introduced. Within several years, new networks of paved roads were built to facilitate vehicular travel, which subtly changed the overall design of the course. (Historically, "carts" were the wheeled bag racks that were used before the introduction of motorized golf "cars." Modern vernacular has blurred this distinction.)

#### ***Evaluation of the Golf Course***

The evolutionary nature of designed landscapes presents challenges in evaluation of golf courses for the National Register of Historic Places. Guidance on the evaluation of historic designed landscapes such as golf courses is offered within *National Register Bulletin 18, How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*. A golf course and its associated buildings presents several components that require consideration to evaluate the course as a cultural resource. Within the overall golf course landscape, each hole consisting of the teeing ground, the fairway, and the putting green, should be regarded as a potential contributing unit. The layout of the holes, the overall configuration and circulation of the 18 play areas, and the design of each hole should be noted. Often golf course designs will show the clear influence of an earlier, renowned course, or will have features found on other courses, and consideration of these factors helps to place a particular course within a stylistic context. The very impressive, architect-designed buildings on some historic courses may enhance the overall design sophistication of the course, and add to the significance of the resource.

Buildings that existed before a course's construction and were called into service as club houses and secondary buildings, becoming part of the overall course design, can gain significance through their use in support of the golf course. The presence or lack of a club house, or its degree of integrity, may be important in establishing the eligibility of the whole golf course, but there are cases where the design of the landscape may be significant enough to overcome the loss of a club house, or its loss of integrity. The work of the golf course architect may be significant enough to stand alone. Generally, the natural evolution of a golf course, including slight redesign and the incorporation of new features such as roads for golf carts, will not lessen significant characteristics of an important course.

#### ***Sewell's Point Golf Course, Naval Station Norfolk, Norfolk, Virginia***

Sewell's Point Golf Course was designed by Donald Ross in 1926, and laid out as an 18-hole course based on the Muirfield links in Scotland. The overall design presents a counterclockwise circle along a perimeter formed by holes one through 10, surrounding a clockwise circle tracing holes 11 through 18. Built around 1926, the club house is strategically placed at the point where the circular pattern alters so that a nine-hole game may be conveniently played. Constructed for the Norfolk Golf Club, the course was acquired by the United States Navy in 1942, whereafter it became the Commissioned Officers' Club. In the 1970s, the club and course were opened to all Navy personnel and became known as the Sewell's Point Golf Club or Sewell's Point Golf Course. Under the ownership of the Norfolk Golf Club and the stewardship of the U.S. Navy, the course has changed little. Following the 1930s, the third and fourth holes were altered and the fifth hole was replaced. In 1986, alterations to the greens were carried out; the crowned edges were modified and the grass was changed from Bermuda to bent. Changes such as these, to ease play and maintenance, have often been made to Ross-designed courses, altering the details and subtleties, but leaving the overall composition intact.

In the mid-20th century, the Sewell's Point course was tested by two of golf's leading players. Sam Snead joined the Navy at the beginning of World War II and was stationed at Norfolk Naval Base, where he reported for duty the day after winning the 1942 PGA tournament. At Sewell's

Point, Snead gave golf lessons to officers. In 1954, Arnold Palmer, teamed with a club pro, presented an exhibition round of golf.

Evaluation of the Sewell's Point Golf Course and Club House was conducted by the U.S. Navy in consultation with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (state historic preservation office), as part of the Navy's comprehensive evaluation of historic resources at the Norfolk Naval Base. The golf course and club house were found eligible for listing in the National Register. The club house was designed in the English Arts and Crafts style by an unidentified architect. It is of frame construction, clad with shingles, and stands two stories tall. A wide wrap-around veranda skirts the second level offering views out onto the course and is tucked under the building's broad hipped roof which terminates in deep, downward-curving eaves. Wide eyebrow dormers break the slope of the roof, from which a massive stucco-clad chimney rises. A split staircase ascends to the veranda on the west side, framing the entrance to the building's first level; a broad staircase rises to the veranda on the south. French doors open onto the porch along the second level, accessing a ballroom, in which a massive Arts and Crafts-style fireplace is the dominant feature.

The Sewell's Point course is one of nine golf courses in Virginia attributed to Donald Ross, where he either prepared the initial designs or remodeled existing facilities. These courses have not been evaluated, other than the course at The Homestead in Hot Springs, which is a contributing landscape feature at this late-19th-century resort, which is listed on the National Register. Although assessments have not been made with respect to Ross' other golf courses in Virginia, the high integrity of the Sewell's Point course, its distinctive design based on Scotland's Muirfield links, and the architectural integrity of the original club house made it clear that the course is eligible for the National Register. In contrast, the course was not considered historic for its association with Sam Snead and Arnold Palmer. While they are nationally important figures in golf history, their use of the course for training and exhibition plays reflects only a minor association with their extraordinary careers.

#### ***Belmont Park Golf Course***

Belmont Golf Course is located in Henrico County in the northern suburbs of Richmond, Virginia. It is among a handful of Virginia golf

courses that trace their history to the early 1900s. Today, Belmont is a municipal course, but it began as the Hermitage Golf Club in October 1900. The Hermitage Club used old exposition grounds located several miles south of the present course as its initial course and eventually employed the services of Arthur Warren Tillinghast to design the present course by 1917. The course was finished for the cost of \$3,000: \$1,000 for Tillinghast's fee, \$1,200 for grass seed, and \$800 for labor. The course was redesigned by Donald Ross at an uncertain date, either 1927 or 1940.

The Hermitage Club hosted the inaugural Virginia State Open championship in 1924. After World War II, it was the site of the Richmond Open in 1945 and 1946. In 1949, the club hosted the only Professional Golf Association championship ever held in Virginia, where Virginia native Sam Snead won. The Hermitage Golf Club expanded in the 1950s, buying another tract where William and David Gordon of Philadelphia laid out the Ethelwood Course. The original course was sold to Henrico County in 1977. Renamed Belmont Park, the course continues in regular operation as a public facility.

While Belmont Park has never been formally evaluated, it harbors a strong potential for eligibility to the National Register. The 18-hole course exhibits good design and landscape integrity. While Tillinghast or Ross drawings for the course have not been located, Virginia golf historian Bruce Matson notes that the course retains essentially the same configuration and design features of the 1949 PGA championship period. The historic club house predates the course, serving originally as the center of the Warren Farm and dating to the mid-19th century. The modest Italianate-style farmhouse was expanded by the Hermitage Golf Club and historic photographs reflect c. 1920s Arts and Crafts embellishments. Although the building has been recently remodeled and is now used as a recreation center, it still retains sufficient integrity to be a contributing resource. Recently constructed tennis courts and a pro shop building do not contribute to the historic period of 1916 to 1950.

The 6,449-yard course features a layout split into two similar-sized areas by a major thoroughfare. Hilliard Road has bisected the course for over 50 years. A road underpass for golfers

was built to provide safer passage from one side of the course to the other. Like the Sewell's Point Course, this course does not include any highly dramatic features. Often typical of Ross' designs, the challenges are more subtle. While the vegetation and playing surfaces have been rehabilitated over the years, the circulation and overall layout are largely intact with respect to the Donald Ross redesign. The course is also the only one in Virginia ever used for a PGA Championship tournament. The Hermitage Golf Club is further significant as one of six clubs to form the Virginia State Golf League (now called the Virginia State Golf Association) in 1904. While the Hermitage Golf Club has relocated, the Belmont Park course's period of significance spans the founding years of the Hermitage Club, when it played an important role in the evolution of golf in Virginia, especially during the 1940s.

The documentation and evaluation of golf courses adds an exciting and revealing component to an understanding of America's cultural history. As with the evolution of American architecture, the history of golf course design reflects the influence of European ideas early on, giving way to the gradual emergence of an American design tradition; these developments also show an increasing democratization of design. Virginia is fortunate in possessing notable examples by two of America's foremost golf course architects, which, combined with other significant American golf courses, provide benchmarks for evaluation of golf courses as cultural resources.

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